

REVIEW ESSAY

## Boy Talk: Social Theory and Its Discontents

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- Heine Andersen and Lars Bo Kaspersen (eds.) 2000. *Classical and Modern Social Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 524 pp. (0-6312-1288-4)
- Zygmunt Bauman 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 228 pp. (0-7456-2410-3)
- Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli and Frank Webster (eds.) 1999. *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of the Present*. London: Sage, 502 pp. (0-7619-5926-2)
- Gerard Delanty 2000. *Modernity and Postmodernity*. London: Sage, 194 pp. (0-7619-5904-1)
- Roberta Garner (ed.) 2000. *Social Theory: Continuity and Confrontation*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 592 pp. (1-5511-1235-3)
- Trevor Noble 2000. *Social Theory and Social Change*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 260 pp. (0-3339-1239-X)

There seems something oddly old-fashioned about assessing the contemporaneity of a critical text by the number of women writers that it recognises – but then there are times when only the bluntest of tools will do. I reached this conclusion while searching for a suitable core text for a social theory module. I had two key concerns: to find texts that offered thoughtful accounts of the different ways of theorising the relationship between modernity and postmodernity; and to find texts that would represent the full diversity of social theory. The second has not proved easy, and reading the most recent surveys of the field, one could be forgiven for thinking that gender played a negligible role in the functioning of contemporary society. Supposedly comprehensive surveys of the field, such as Callinicos's *Social Theory: A Historical Introduction*, manage to nod to such quaintly unreadable figures as Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer, without giving over a single page to feminism, and offer indexes that run on forever without mentioning the work of a single woman writer. What, then, is a good way forward for students?

I will be considering six contenders: Noble's *Social Theory and Social Change* is that standby of undergraduate reading lists, the tour of the Big Names and Big Ideas in the field – an approach which I shall be suggesting raises particular problems when it comes to social theory; Andersen and Kaspersen take on a similar task, but is a

larger text, aiming to survey the field in much greater depth; Garner's text is that key resource, the reader, but one that takes a fresh and creative approach to this task, and *Understanding Contemporary Society* is similarly ambitious and innovative, since it offers essays on key aspects of the present, exploring the various arguments about how to read and apply social theory, in tandem with assessments of its ability to explain contemporary social phenomena. Delanty's *Modernity and Postmodernity* has its own argument to make about the relationship between the two terms, but it does so via a careful and systematic consideration of key writers in the debate; Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* offers a different way to pose these questions to students – via a sustained and polemical analysis of the present which represents a point in, rather than a survey of, these debates.

Why do I open by making such an issue of gender? Gender appears in several of these texts as the concern of a small specialist body of writers, or as one of the problems thrown up in recent years by postmodernism – two perspectives which, I shall be suggesting, construct feminism in ways that effectively exclude it from what purports to be a coherent and comprehensive overview of social theory. For instance, feminism is mentioned twice in Noble's textbook. The first time, very early on, so that he can brand as erroneous the notion that 'all thought is necessarily "gendered"' (p. 13). Having assured us that it is simply not the case that 'sociology is ideological' (p. 14), the way is cleared for an account of social theory as the province of Giddens, Tonnies, Parsons, Weber and Bell. No room here for Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Dorothy Smith or Gloria Anzaldua. I should state now that this is not simply a question of disagreeing with a particular choice of theorists – it is inevitable that any selection will be partial. But students in this field will need to be educated in reading textbooks as acts of canon-formation which represent the perspectives of particular social groups. They need also to study how those decisions shape the kinds of uses to which social theory is put, and the concepts that are assumed to be central to it.

For instance, although gender is raised as a concern in *Classical and Modern Social Theory*, it is treated in a chapter of its own – presumably a trade-off for the fact that no other chapter seems to feel the need to mention it. The text thus shares with Noble, Delanty and Bauman a conception of social theory as directed towards a specific set of questions and concepts that reflect a gendered perspective, and overlook the key questions raised by feminism. Consider the following areas. Social change is conceptualised as driven by economic shifts or breaking points in contradictory philosophies, never (as feminism has reason to be aware) as brought about by social protest. Institutional responsibility is seen as a 'problem' for an existential self longing to be free of obligations, never (as feminist theorists of maternity might suggest) as a set of caring responsibilities that generate positive bonds of love. The 'reproduction' of the social is seen as a question of economic structures, institutions in the political sphere, and public roles – never as a biological question of regulated

conception and childbirth. The self is imagined to proceed through rational choice, facing dilemmas solved with reference to abstract schemas – rather than as embodied and emotionally driven. ‘Nation’ and ‘class’ are presented as unified collectivities, not as riven by contradictory dimensions of gender. We might want to disagree with these alternative positions – and within feminism, the debates are at their sharpest and most interesting – but the attempt to think social theory without even broaching these questions ensures that it remains the perspective of a small elite.

A series of key problems arise from the failure to integrate feminist analysis into a narrowly conceived notion of ‘Boy Theory’. It is crucial to grasp these if we are to see gender as more than simply an optional extra chapter in writings on social theory. Given the centrality of gender to that ‘social’ which social theory purports to scrutinise, it cannot be omitted without conceptualising social theory itself in a partial and distorted way. A series of manoeuvres are necessary if theorists are to exclude gender – other exclusions, of the disciplines, ideas and perspectives with which it interlocks.

What else is excluded alongside gender? The first exclusion is of any serious understanding of postmodernism – and this is often achieved by explicitly *bracketing* feminism with postmodernism – for instance Noble’s only other mention of feminism is as a component part of postmodernist theory (p. 221). Such a chronology is a weak understanding of both feminism and postmodernism. In such accounts, postmodernism appears as a recent (and transient) intellectual phenomenon, coming late to the game of social theory – and even, in Noble’s account, one that few social theorists accept any longer (p. 242). Delanty’s rebuttal to such a reading of postmodernism is clear: by ‘projecting postmodernity back onto modernity itself’ (p. 49) we can see that there is nothing in postmodern social theory that is not already central to modern social theory. Thus Nietzsche figures large in his analysis, as a nineteenth-century figure who raised these questions at the heart of modernity, serving to undermine the contention that these are merely late twentieth-century supplements to an already established agenda. The introduction of radical contingency into all claims to knowledge, the absence of a social elite to arbitrate across philosophical and political perspectives, the democratisation of taste: these are the core principles of modernity just as much as they are of postmodernity. Indeed, I would suggest that we must read the intensification of these questions through postmodernism as partly a consequence of the destabilising projects of resistance movements, with their scorn for the totalising projects of Enlightenment knowledge, their insistent attention to the body and the erotic, and their interest in the destructive, unconscious desires that drive grand projects of social reform. In other words, postmodernism comes as an echo of the challenges raised by feminist, gay and anti-colonial social theory. The canonising of ‘postmodernist social theory’ as a recent arrival, under the names of Lyotard, Baudrillard and Jameson, serves to obscure its true genealogy – and also ensures

that feminism can then be inserted as one compartment of this larger, recent (male authored) philosophy.

The second key problem is the absence of questions of the psychic – which conveniently renders large swathes of feminism irrelevant. The psychic life of the gendered subject has been a persistent concern for feminism in its search to explain how fantasies of sexual power and maternal terror drive men to organise a social world that alternately idolises and debases women. But both feminism and psychoanalysis disappear together when desire is removed from the curriculum of the social. Although gender is my key concern here, this construction of the social as having no unconscious, allows for another key erasure: race. No mention here of Fanon, whose argument of a violent race-hatred that drives Western civility should work corrosively on concepts such as rational choice theory and Habermas's public sphere, which manage to make it through unscathed in a vision of social theory without the unconscious. Even *Understanding Contemporary Society*, which begins with a clear statement that sociology must reconceive its mission in order to take full account of the psychic, manages to mention Freud only once in its five hundred pages.

The third crucial oversight that functions here is a narrow conception of what constitutes a theoretical endeavour. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's career so clearly demonstrates the importance for feminism of intellectual labour taking place through both scholarly and literary discourse, but in the impoverished world of the Big Names and their Big Ideas, there is no space for the imaginative leap that would encompass Oscar Wilde as a key theorist of consumer culture or Angela Carter as a key theorist of memory and history – while, tainted with his literary origins, even such an obvious candidate for the Marxist canon as Brecht ceases to be understood as a social theorist worthy of mention at all. In turn, this ensures that the work of theorists with a literary interest appear in a partial or distorted form. Just as Engels's work on the family becomes peripheral in texts that have little interest in gender, so Lukacs's work on the novel need not be mentioned in collections that have no interest in the literary.

This kind of narrow notion of disciplinarity is a poor starting point for a field as heterogeneous as social theory, and an activity which surely proceeds through their widest possible range of forms of thought. What place for surrealism, for instance, whose absence in turn ensures that of Debord and the Situationists? Indeed, it may even amount to an act of sociological imperialism, as in the case of Noble who moves in the first sentences of his book from replacing his claim that he will be looking at 'social theory' to one that he is looking at 'sociology and change' (p. 2) – as if the two were somehow synonymous. Against this impulse *Understanding Contemporary Society* opens with a clear statement of the post-disciplinary condition in which we now think (pp. 3–5) – an important consideration since, as Carl Boggs's lively chapter on 'Intellectuals' makes clear, academic debate will only become more secluded

unless it recognises that critical thinking now takes place across a wide range of social spaces, to which it urgently needs to connect itself. Feminism has historically been plugged into those other spaces of critique – consciousness-raising groups, activist campaigns, consumer boycotts. And within the academy, it is no accident that feminist theory has developed particularly strongly within the Humanities, that set of disciplines that valorises the dimensions of intimacy, identity, personal response, the sensual and the particular – terms that have been at the heart of the feminist inquiry. We should then be suspicious of the resistance of sociology to recognising that social theory crosses the disciplinary boundaries that it relies on. It should be a cause of some concern that while no serious literary scholar would attempt to write about poetry without a consideration of the social and economic determinants of their material, sociologists still assume that it is possible to write social theory without reference to the literary. *Understanding Contemporary Society* makes an effort to remedy this. When the first essay (Christopher Norris) opens with a discussion of *The Waste Land* (p. 25), and the second (Michele Barrett) explores post-feminism through the figure of *Star Trek: Voyager's* Captain Janeway, it is clear that a more expansive notion of 'thinking the social' is at work. Similarly, Delanty makes use of Joyce and Kandinsky to advance his argument. (Although we should note how these examples also indicate the gendered canons of the humanities – if the aim is to explore fragmentation and decentred identity, why Eliot rather than Gertrude Stein; Joyce rather than Virginia Woolf?)

The fourth problem is a more explicitly political one: is it possible to use the full potential of social theory to critique the shortcomings of existing social structures, without a keen sense of how that critique might itself be gendered? Bauman's version of social theory might be usefully offered to students as an example of the conceptual shortcomings that follow from marginalising gender. Consider this: Bauman's diagnosis of the failings of contemporary culture are that private emotional concerns have colonised the world of public affairs; that an identity based on consumption has displaced one based on production; and that society suffers from the loss of the bold projects to create 'solid' institutions, in favour of the provisional world of 'liquid' relationships, which we remake as fast as we generate them. Irigaray has commented on the negative feminine attributes ascribed to the liquid, and Bauman's fear of a liquid emotional consumer-society resonates with just such a fear of the feminine. The fact that such a set of concepts can be deployed without any such reflection should be a reminder of the need to think about the language of theory as a way of explicating its hidden agendas. And a bibliography which manages to include a paltry six women, and makes no mention of feminism in particular, is a reminder that ignorance of current debates paves the way for such uncritical theorisation.

Moreover, Bauman's position is necessarily antithetical to feminism through its rejection of any sense of a ruthlessly stratified society. Bauman argues that a focus on individual satisfaction has unsettled the solidity of divisions of class – and

parenthetically he adds '(or gender divisions for that matter)' as if gender could be an afterthought to a project. In his vision of an atomised postmodernity, in which we all pursue disjointed micro-projects of self-fulfilment, there are no great power structures, and no great collective resistances. But as Foucault reminds us, power that is dispersed across a host of projects may nevertheless have its own coherence, which ensures certain hegemonic effects. Gender inequality may operate along routes other than a unified assertion of patriarchy – instead, what appear to be different local particularities may lock together into a mosaic of inequalities that still serve to divide privilege sharply. Similarly, the repeated claim that there is no longer any sense of citizenship, or forum for political resistance, barely seems to register the networks of global outrage that surrounds us. Again, I would suggest that an understanding of theories of gender would pave the way for a more nuanced grasp of the social than can fit within so schematic a perspective.

What else is to be gained by situating gender as far more central to social theory? First, a much needed theoretical sharpness – theory which claims to explain the social while remaining silent about gender is, simply, bad social theory. But secondly, a more sceptical and open-ended attitude to the goals and practices of theory itself. It is no coincidence that the most exciting writing on social theory is that with the greatest interest in the voices of the marginalised. Texts that rely on the canonical writings of white male theorists rehearse the same sterile debates – managing to misrepresent both the texture of the social and the history of theoretical labour. Delanty's work makes important steps in this direction; despite his scant attention to gender, he is at least keen to open up the canon of social theory, drawing on Leo Strauss, Eric Voeglin and Hans Blumenberg. Bringing in writings that deserve to be far more widely read, he opens up lively debates, rather than presenting what appears to be a closed and ossified discipline. Conversely, Andersen and Kaspersen construct postmodernity as a late – and optional – perspective, a decision which necessitates erasing figures such as Nietzsche from their survey of the nineteenth century. The risk here is that students grasp social theory as a kind of benign developmental procedure, which only recently erupted into discord. Their third section presents 'contemporary challenges to classical and modern theory' – as if it was only a few recent souls who had had the temerity to question the received canon. Hence the very narrative of what social theory is, and how it develops, tends towards a closure around core questions, with other topics related to an optional periphery (a structure that reproduces itself in degree programmes that balance core lectures on Bauman and Durkheim with optional modules on the body or the emotions).

A welcome alternative to such an account – which nevertheless acknowledges the value of existing theoretical traditions – comes from Garner's *Social Theory: Continuity and Confrontation*. No course can afford to rely too heavily on summaries without a good collection of primary material to match them – one of the limitations of Andersen and Kaspersen's text is their reliance on paraphrase over quotation, with

only Simmel coming across as a figure whose prose we might still want to read. Garner's audience is an undergraduate one, a focus which gives her licence for a more vernacular account of theory – social theory comes with 'four giants' (p. 25) – an engaging style which draws the reader into a conversation, even if at times it veers towards the condescending (surely no one's work deserves to be termed 'a bit controversial but intriguing' (p. 8)). Also welcome is the way in which she stresses her own personal responses to the pieces she has chosen, which enables her to offer a kind of emotional education into feeling passionate about theory – a lesson that some academics need as much (perhaps, more) than students.

Her intellectual agenda is equally stimulating, and is driven by two key goals, reflected in both her choice of material and method of presenting it. The first is her determination to expand our conception of the theoretical canon. Although I disagree with the temerity with which Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel remain situated at the heart of her account, it is hard to imagine an editor who would not insist upon it. But she more than compensates for this by opening her book with Machiavelli and Burke (rather than Adam Smith, who is fast becoming sociology's 'usual suspect'), and extending it to Appadurai and Ang. Perhaps most importantly, she situates Du Bois at the heart of the project of modern social theory, placing him alongside the Chicago School to make the fact that ethnicity must be seen as a founding question of American sociology.

Her most welcome tactical move is to pair key canonical writings with recent attempts to develop – or break with – their formulations. Marshall McLuhan is paired with Ien Ang, Marx with Stanley Aronowitz, and the Chicago School with William Wilson. The collection thus succeeds in presenting theory as a genuinely dialogical process – and one can only wish that there had been the space to venture this more often than she does. This sense of social theory as a dialogue serves to relativise the status of the various writers – any of them may yet be taken up or put down in unexpected ways. It is a crucial insight that needs to be made available to students – that theory remains in flux not only in the sense that there are 'new challenges', but in the sense that old theorists are made new and strange for us by the ways that their inheritors rework them. What, for instance, might a collection look like which represented Marxism with Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, Simmel via Elizabeth Wilson's *The Sphinx in the City*, and Weber with an extract from George Ritzer?

Garner's work could become a model for textbooks written at a higher level. *Understanding Contemporary Society* could also be a model for its ability to weld together different theoretical approaches around single themes in a way that shows the use and relevance of the writers it covers. Organised around topics rather than names, its various contributors give an account of a key feature of contemporary society which focuses strongly on the key theoretical debates around each area. Like Garner, this too preserves a dialogical perspective, ensuring that we grasp people as

engaged in a range of debates, rather than simply as isolated in the chapters that focus on them. Judith Butler, for instance, appears once as an over-optimistic opponent of biology in Barrett's reading of *Star Trek: Voyager* (p. 54), again as an unwelcome alternative to empiricist material accounts of embodiment (p. 420), and a third time as useful for understanding why simple notions of compartmentalised conceptions of inequality (race, class and gender) fail to grasp the extent to which subjects must actively insert themselves into those categories (pp. 479–80). For students making use of social theory, the transferability of writers is an important lesson – even if, in this case, one would have to also teach the lesson of how certain theorists (particularly certain postmodern feminists) come to be figures who are ritually rejected in order to secure less challenging (and more sociologically conventional) positions.

It is with that problem of boundary closings that I want to end. *Understanding Contemporary Society* shows the importance of multi-authored over single-authored texts in this field. The ritualised rebuttals of an author's least favourite theorist inevitably resurface in students' essays reliant on single-authored textbooks: how tired am I of hearing that Foucault does not allow for agency, that the Frankfurt School did too little empirical work, and that Haraway ignores the corporate control of cyberspace? If student textbooks are to do more than compound such gross misreadings, they need to be produced under conditions of greater self-reflexivity. The prevalent conception of social theory as the work of men suggests how narrow a conception of its vitality we have allowed ourselves to foster. What is needed is perhaps a textbook for academics that would update and transform these too parochial visions of what constitutes social theory in favour of a celebration of its full host of practitioners.